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Personal Experiences

by

Nechemia Knobel

PREFACE

The personal experiences of (Naum Shuman) at the beginning of World War II. , age 75, is a permanent resident and citizen of Canada. What follows is a lecture given to a group of students, teachers and social workers at Eastern Washington University in Cheney Washington. The lecture was held in conjunction with the Auschwitz Exhibit on May 12, 1988, in the Senior Hall at the University.

BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF NECHEMIA

I was raised and lived in Lodz, Poland. All of my life, I worked since I was quite young, about twelve or thirteen, in the tailor trade, mostly in small shops in the clothing industry in Lodz.

My education was very limited because we did not have materialistic things; we were poor. When I was quite young, I attended the Jewish cheder -- like elementary school. When I grew older I worked during the days and in the evenings I attended classes.

Since my early youth, I have been interested in Jewish (Yiddish) literature. I read a lot, mostly borrowing books from libraries. I was also very interested in listening to lectures from famous and great political leaders from the various political parties of Poland.

CHAPTER ONE

How The War Started

The beginning of the persecutions and tortures against the Jews began on Friday, September 1, 1939, forty-nine years ago. The state Polish radio broadcasted that on the morning of the 1st of September, 1939, around 3:00 a.m., the German airforce had bombarded the main cities of Poland. Some of these cities included Warsaw, Vilno, Lublin, Radom and many, many more populated and smaller cities, towns and villages.

I lived in the second largest city in Poland, Lodz, which then had a population of around 1.5 million people. Besides the majority of Christian/Catholic Poles, there were also 233,000 Jews living in Lodz, along with nearly as many Polish citizens as German Nationals. It is possible that because of the high concentration of German Nationals, the Nazis did not bombard Lodz in the first days of the war. AB. 56,000 Germans

Just three or four days after the first bombardments, some bombs did fall near the railway stations in Lodz, but overall, there was little bombing. So in the first few days we did not have the personal experience of what was going on in the other cities of Poland -- except that the local government ordered the people of Lodz to dig trenches in the city parks and to cover all windows with dark, colored

paper. On the radio, we heard that at 5:00 a.m., September 1, the German Army crossed the borders in several western and northern border towns -- Posen, Chenstochow, Gdimia, Dancig -- and then we were told that the Polish Army had defended the country with all their bravery and strength.

On Tuesday, September 5, 1939, the Polish government issued an order by radio, that all men from the ages of 16 to 50, must leave their homes and go directly to the capitol of Poland, Warsaw. It was stated that organized and formal military units would be created there to defend the capitol and that, as loyal citizens, we should be willing to fight the Nazis. We were, in effect, ordered to follow these instructions to go to the capitol to fight the Nazis.

CHAPTER TWO

The Journey to Warsaw

On Wednesday, September 6, 1939, early in the morning, my three brothers and I joined together with hundreds and hundreds of other Jewish men to walk out of the city of Lodz in the direction of our capitol, Warsaw.

My oldest brother Josef was thirty-eight. He has a wife, Etke and an eight year old son, Izy shortenen from Israel. They after lived in the ghetto in Lodz. He decided to give up on walking to Warsaw after five or six kilometers.

saying, "I see no use in leaving my family without any means of support." He returned to Lodz.

My youngest brother, LEON at seventeen was not yet married. He joined a group of his young friends and departed from us as well. I was left to walk with one brother, CHIL then about 27 -- he also had a wife and a son about two years old -- my brother-in-law, Shaya PROMNICKI and another friend who now lives in Israel. .

We proceeded on our journey to the capitol. We mostly followed paths through the fields because masses of people were on the main roads. The Nazi airforce continually bombed the roads and the planes were flying very low. Machine guns shot directly into the milling refugees from these low-flying planes. The roads were full of shot-up corpses until the military units which followed then cleaned up by throwing the corpses into the ditches at the sides of the road.

In the middle of the night, September 6, Wednesday, we reached a city by the name of Lovich, located about two-thirds of the distance from Lodz to Warsaw. The city of Lovich was destroyed by the bombing and firearms. Many of the streets were in flames when we arrived. As we approached the city, all was in total darkness and we stepped on bodies lying in the road. The only light was

By

from the burning houses. Yet we pressed on and proceeded to pass through that city.

I had a friend with whom I worked in a tailor shop in Lodz. His parents lived in a city farther from Lodz but closer to Warsaw, called Grodzisk. We figured that upon reaching that place, we could have some help with food and a little rest in a house. Until then our only rest had been partial -- in the open fields or sometimes in bushes.

Thursday evening, September 7, while heading for Grodzisk, we approached a farm village. We knocked on the door of a farmer and to our fortunate surprise, the farmer opened the door and let us in. He allowed us to stay in a barn filled with hay and straw, and told us, "You stay here and take a rest." His gentle wife brought to us a loaf of bread with a large pot of fat borsht, a sort of farmer's soup. We were very happy with the meal and the rest. The farmer told us that their two sons were in the Polish Army and were perhaps in the same situation, seeking food and shelter.

As we rested in the barn we heard noises from motorcycles. We looked out the openings in the barn and saw a long column of motorcycles, with three or four German armed soldiers on each motorcycle. The soldiers on motorcycles were driving in the direction of the village. By sunrise, the farmer came to us and said that the Germans had occupied the village during the night and they had asked

the residents if there were any Jews living in this small community. Knowing we were Jews, the farmer recommended we leave the farm and their hospitality soon. His wife brought us food again: two loaves of bread and a large piece of dry cheese as well as a piece of bacon meat. Before we left, each of us picked out something from his own small parcel to give to the generous farmer. I personally gave him my extra underwear which I had brought with me from home. The farmer then gave us directions on how to leave and not be seen by either the neighbors or the Germans.

Of course, by this time, we had decided not to go in the direction of Warsaw. The German Army had already surrounded the city and blocked all the routes to Warsaw. So we started to go back in the direction of Lodz. My brother, CHIEL who was still with me, was so stubborn. He decided to reach Warsaw by any means possible and he went in the opposite direction. Two months later, we found out that it took him an entire week, with great difficulty as well as a lot of luck and miracles but he reached Warsaw. He came back to Lodz in November to be with his family. The people of Warsaw still fought the Nazis for a full four weeks before surrendering to their terrible strength.

CHAPTER THREE

The Journey From The Farm To Rava Mazowietzk

As my brother headed towards Warsaw, the three of us remaining continued on our journey. It was now September 10, a Saturday. By that afternoon, we had reached a city called Amshinow or, in Polish, Mshchonow. To our surprise, when we reached the city market, we noticed that some bearded Jews were wearing armbands and functioning as a sort of local militia. The Polish police had fled as soon as the Germans stepped in, some surrendering to the Germans and others merely changing their clothes to hide the fact that they were police.

The Jewish militia gave directions to the people who were going through the city. They told everyone where to go. In that city, some of the Jewish housewives gave away some food, bread and drinking water to all the people who asked .

In the evening, after resting a while in some bushes near the city, we proceeded on our way in the direction of the next nearest city, Rava Mazovietzk.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rava Mazovietzk

Rava Mazovietck was located about 35-40 kilometers from Lodz and it was on the road to this city that we had our first encounter with the Nazis.

In the evening on Saturday, September 10, we, along with hundreds of others, were stopped at a checkpoint by German soldiers. Everyone was checked and personally searched. Those who were wearing any military garments -- jackets, pants or even boots, were directed to the left side of the checkpoint to an assembly of Polish POW (prisoners of war). Others who wore civilian clothes were directed to the right side to a huge open field. In the field there was a German armed patrol every few meters.

During the night, more and more people came to the field and were separated accordingly. The entire field was filled with thousands and thousands of people. There, we spent the night lying on the ground. This situation lasted until the early morning hours. There was no question of receiving any food or water. People were so desperate with hunger, they dug into the earth to find some food, perhaps a hidden potato. In the early morning, we enjoyed licking the grass which held the morning dew to relieve our thirst.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Journey To The City Rava Mazovietzk

LAUT SPRECHER

In the early morning, we were ordered, by megaphones, to stand up and form columns to be ready to march. So we marched column after column. When the column in which we were marching reached the central market, we saw a mass of people lying on the ground face down. We were then directed to a huge church. The church was so packed that there was no place to sit; everyone was standing shoulder-to-shoulder or back-to-front; it was difficult to breathe.

Suddenly, the soldiers started shooting into the church windows from the outside. Pieces of broken glass fell on the heads and bodies of those who happened to be standing near the walls. People started screaming because of the pain of their wounds; blood covered their heads, their faces, clothing and hands. Minutes later, the shooting began again through the windows of the church.

During the night, people were forced to relieve themselves -- out of necessity -- on the spot where they stood.

Finally, in the morning, the doors of the church were opened. Then came an order, "Heraus," or "out." So, all the people came out of the church and onto the big churchyard. (Normally, the churchyard was the place where many people gathered on Sundays for the Christian Mass. It

was a common thing in most cities of Poland for people to come to a main church from the villages.)

CHAPTER SIX

On The Churchyard

When all the people left the church and were standing in the churchyard, a German officer asked, through a megaphone if there were any Folksdeutsche present. Folksdeutsche were what the Polish citizens with German ancestry were called. The Germans called the Folksdeutsche out and a significant number of them stepped forward. The officer then asked them who among them could speak German and Polish. All of them were raised in Polish schools and thus could speak both languages. The Germans picked out several from the group and used them as translators: the Germans gave the orders in German and the Folksdeutsche repeated all of the orders in Polish. The remainder of the group of Folksdeutsche were released on the spot except for the few needed translators.

Then the orders came out from the megaphone in both German and Polish: All who were Polish-Christian were to go to one side of the yard. Accordingly, a mass of people went to the Polish side. (Earlier they had not asked about nationality but all men were ordered to the fields and to the church.) After the group had been separated by

nationality, there came a harsh warning, "Are there any Jews hidden amongst the Poles? If we find some Jews, they will be punished." Some Jews had joined with the Poles and they stepped out from the Polish group and began to explain to the German officers, "My Father or Mother was Jewish. But I am a real Christian, and have nothing in common with Jews." There were approximately 25-30 people in this group. There were, by contrast, hundreds in the Polish group. At this time, drastic orders were issued: "Who from the real Poles is ready to punish hidden Jews?" A large group of especially strong Poles were selected by the Germans for this job. They were given sticks, whips and other objects. The Germans then screamed, "Shlag zey shtark," or "beat them fiercely." The strong Poles started beating those people enthusiastically and with great strength. Most of those beaten fell to the ground and could not stand up. Those who could, stood with great difficulty, and were pushed back into the Jewish group. Of those who were beaten to the point of falling, some were lying unconscious; they were dragged away to the other side of the churchyard, by the walls. After a while, we heard gunshots. Then one of the German officers spoke to the Polish group in German and repeated in Polish by one of the designated translators. He said, "The Jews want the war and you innocent Poles are suffering because of the Jews. Thus, the German Army and the German people will punish them accordingly. Now, all

the Poles will be escorted by the German soldiers to the central marketplace. Stationed there are military field kitchens and all of you will be supplied with sufficient food and drink. Just form a column of four in a row and march to the marketplace."

In just a few minutes all the Poles left the churchyard. Those of us left behind had no idea what would happen to us. The remaining group was comprised of approximately five or six hundred Jews.

When the yard was cleared of the Poles, the next threat to the Jews came: "Uhren und rings heraus!" or "watches and rings out!" "Whoever hides a watch or ring will be shot on the spot." Of course, faced with such a threat, everyone took off his wristwatch or pocketwatch with chain, and threw it into the pile in the middle of the yard between the Jewish group and the Germans. There was a huge pile of jewelry accumulated at this point. The Germans then brought bags into which they put all the goods taken from the Jews. The bags were then loaded into military trucks standing by for this purpose.

The next order came: "Geld heraus!" or "Money out!" along with the same warning as before regarding the hiding of anything. After a few minutes, the pile began to grow higher and wider with paper zlotys (Polish money) as well as some money from other countries. There were dollars,

francs, silver and copper coins which again the Germans piled into the bags and loaded onto the trucks.

The next order was for everyone to turn around and face the wall. A group of Poles who had been set aside or were brought back from the marketplace were again given sticks, whips and other objects and told, "Shlag di juden shtark," or "beat the Jews fiercely." In the following minutes, many Jews were suddenly lying on the ground with bloodied faces and hands. To my good fortune or miracle, I was very near the wall and the beatings did not reach me. We were facing the wall and there were probably ten or fifteen people behind me who, even though severly beaten, still had the strength to stand on their feet. They were allowed to stay. The others who had been beaten unconscious were dragged away by the Poles to the other side of the church. Soon afterwards, we heard machine guns firing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On The Side Streets

After this ordeal, we were ordered to form columns of four in a row. We were escorted by German soldiers and marched to the central market. Upon passing the marketplace, we witnessed a mass of people lying on the ground. On one side of the marketplace there were trucks and military field kitchens with huge kettles and a long

line of Poles, lined up to receive food. On the opposite side were German soldiers armed with machine guns.

Our group was directed to a side street. There we were ordered to stand alongside the houses facing the street. The line we formed was very long; we were standing two and three people deep along the street walls. The German soldiers began to walk along the line. They ordered: "Peck weck," or "parcels out." Everyone had brought a small package with him -- some clothes or maybe some food. I had a jacket, pants, a sweater,a pair of socks and a pair of sandals. Everyone threw the parcels into the middle of the street. When the street was full of parcels, the Germans called some Poles from the marketplace to come take away any of the parcels they wanted for themselves. In just a few moments all of the parcels were grabbed up by the Poles. As soon as the street had been cleared, the Germans called again to the Polish group and told the Poles to exchange clothes with the Jews. The Poles looked around to see which Jews were wearing the nicest clothes. When a Pole found something he liked, he stood by a German soldier and pointed, "I like that suit." The soldier then ordered the Jew to step into a doorway, take off his garment and exchange it with the Pole. This exchange of clothing occurred all down the line of Jews. Usually, the Poles wore cheap work clothes: dirty, torn, patched and mended garments. These were traded for the nicer, dressier clothes

of the Jews. It was again another way to denigrate a human being by having our clean, well-kept clothes taken from us and exchanged with shoddy, ill-kempt garments. It was tragic to look at us.

Standing beside me was a tall man, a Jew, with eyeglasses. As he stepped out from behind the door after the exchange, he had on a short workshirt with short sleeves and pants so short they only reached his knees. The Pole who had exchanged clothing with the tall man was an extremely short fellow. He had to roll up his new garments; he rolled up his sleeves and pants as he walked away.

When the clothing exchange was finished other orders came. It was asked who among us were barbers. A large group of people came forth. The Germans gave them scissors or hand-held clippers which they had earlier taken from Jewish barber shops in the city. They ordered the Jewish barbers to cut the hair of all the Jews. The German soldiers assisting the barbers sometimes told the barbers not to cut all of the hair, but only just one side or in the middle of the head or even to make a cross on the head.

Next came a terrible scene. A group of German soldiers came from the marketplace to the side street where we Jews were standing. They walked back and forth. They pointed with a finger and called out, "Jude." They were commanding Jews to come out to the middle of the street. When they had collected a group of between twenty and thirty Jews, the

Germans had ordered all of the Jewish men, all of the residents of that city, from young boys to old men, to leave their homes, to come to the central city marketplace. The people we had seen earlier on our march into the city, the people we had seen lying on the ground in the marketplace probably were the Jewish residents of Rava Mazovietzk. The residents had experienced the same treatment as we had on the side streets. We found out that during that day, about 400 Jews were shot to death by the Germans with machine guns in the marketplace, including the son of the local community Rabbi.

One tragic but interesting fact that happened throughout all of this: I described earlier, in the marketplace, the Poles were given food from the military kitchens. From a distance we heard a German or a Pole leading the shouting of threatening insults: "Prech zhidamy. Niech zhiye Hitler." "Down with the Jews. Long live Hitler." These slogans were repeated every time the Poles received their food from the military field kitchen and when the Poles grabbed the belongings and parcels of the Jews and when the Poles exchanged clothing with the Jews.

By the end of the day, after sunset, there came another order through the megaphone that all Jewish residents of that city were allowed to go to their homes. The wives, daughters, children and relatives were joyful and filled

with happiness when they met their loved ones outside the gates of the tennis court. Many people left the court.

CHAPTER NINE

The Journey Home

The hundreds of Jews who remained, myself included, did not know our fortune. But about an hour later, again there was an announcement from the megaphones that all remaining Jews could leave the tennis court and return to their cities. Leaving the tennis court in the dark of evening, the first thing my brother-in-law and I did was to find a place to lie down for a rest. After walking a short time, we approached a small area with trees and bushes. So we, along with some other people, lay down on the grass and fell asleep until the next morning. (We had been separated from our friend in the tennis court and did not learn of his fate -- he survived, and eventually made his way to Israel via Russia and Japan -- for about ten years.) In the morning we looked for food. As we walked, we approached a field with turnips that had already been dug and awaiting harvest. With the help of pieces of stones we somehow broke them up and ate them.

I will not write anymore of what happened over the next three days. It was a combination of accidental good luck or miracles that we made it through those three days.

Finally, on Wednesday, September 14, 1939, my brother-in-law, Shaya and I reached the outskirts of Lodz. There we parted, he to the home of his parents in a different part of the city, and I to the place nearby where I lived. But in order to reach my home I had to walk through a very busy street with lots of pedestrians and I was too frightened to walk with my bald head and dirty, torn clothes for fear the Germans, now in Lodz, would identify me as a Jew. I stopped at the house of my friend, about a ten minute walk from my house, and asked for help, to give me anything to cover my head. At the house of my friend were his three sisters. They were anxious to know if maybe I had met their brother because he never came back. But they gave me their brother's cap and I went on my way. About 7 p.m. I knocked on the door of my home. My family hardly recognized me. In the first moments of being home, I collapsed to the floor completely unconscious. How they cleaned me up and put me to bed, I'll never know. They said I'd be better off not knowing. I lay in bed for several days with a high fever until I recovered. After a few weeks, we found out that many, many people who had left their homes that Wednesday, September 6, 1939 never came back and nobody knew what happened to them.

CHAPTER TEN

Conclusion

All that I have described was just a prelude of what was to follow. There were beatings, persecutions, starvation. There was the creation of the ghettos and deportation to the concentration camps with the gas chambers and crematoria.

During the years 1939-1945, thousands of cities, towns, and populated villages were destroyed and six million Jews were exterminated, including one-and-a-half million children.

My brother Josef lived in the ghetto in Lodz. In 1942, the soldiers began what they called the kinder akzion, which means "children action." All children were taken away from their parents and transported to extermination camps. Josef's son, Izzy, was taken to such a camp.

In 1944, Josef and his wife, ETKE were sent to Auschwitz. They did not survive.

My brother CHAMEL lived in the ghetto in Lodz until 1944. He was deported to Auschwitz and did not survive.

My youngest brother, LEO lived in the ghetto in Lodz. He went to several concentration camps and survived the war and is living ir California.

My brother-in-law, Shaya PROMNICKI escaped to Vilno where he joined the Lithuanian division of the army to fight the Nazis. He died on the battlefront. I found this out later at the end of the war, from people who survived.

P.S. From the people who returned home from other, similar journeys, we found out that all over the country the Germans did the same or used similar tactics to torture, capture and kill Jews. Thousands of Jews were killed immediately in the first days and weeks after the German occupation of Poland.

P.P.S. An interesting, additional comment was that in my description, I left out something concerning the behavior of the Poles, both before and after. When we were in the church, Jews, Poles and some Folksdeutsche together, the Poles cursed, calling the Germans dirty names. "Shvabs." That was an insulting name they used. In the church, some Poles said, "What will the shvabs do to us?" But, after the separation of the Jews from the Poles and the Folksdeutsche in the churchyard, when the Germans promised the Poles food and allowed them to freely leave and offered them the belongings of the Jews, the Poles were more than willing to beat the Jews and say Heil to Hitler with the Germans.